

Community resources

[Follow us on Twitter](#) [Check our Reddit](#) [Twitter this](#) [Digg this page](#) [Contact us on IRC](#)

courage is contagious

Viewing cable 09DAMASCUS94, CODEL SMITH: ASAD POSITIVE ON NEW BILATERAL

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#09DAMASCUS94**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09DAMASCUS94	2009-02-01 14:43	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Damascus

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10402>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10403>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10404>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10405>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/10406>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11322>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11323>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11324>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11325>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11326>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11327>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11328>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11329>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11330>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11331>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11332>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11333>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11336>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11337>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11338>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11339>

<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11340>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11341>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11342>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11343>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11344>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11345>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11346>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11348>
<http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/11349>

VZCZCXRO0240
OO RUEHAG RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHDM #0094/01 0321443
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 011443Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5903
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHUNV/USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA PRIORITY 0024
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0528
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 DAMASCUS 000094

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, NEA/IPA, NEA/I, NEA/IR
DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO S/E MITCHELL
NSC FOR SHAPIRO
PARIS FOR WALLER
LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/30/2029

TAGS: [PREL](#) [IAEA](#) [KPAL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [IR](#) [IS](#) [IZ](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: CODEL SMITH: ASAD POSITIVE ON NEW BILATERAL
RELATIONS, DEFENDS SYRIA'S REGIONAL EQUITIES

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.4 b, d.

¶1. (C) Summary: In a January 31 meeting with CODEL Smith, President Bashar al-Asad expressed hope for better relations with the new U.S. administration, called for immediate and sustained U.S. engagement in the region, and defended Syria's relations with Iran, Hizballah and Hamas. On Iran, Asad disputed assertions that Iran's nuclear program was military in nature. Successfully dealing with Iran would require the West to drop its demand that Iran freeze its enrichment activities as a condition for further discussions. Western countries could succeed only by recognizing Iran's NPT right to pursue a civilian nuclear program and moving the politicized issue out of the UN Security Council. On U.S.-Syrian bilateral relations, Asad maintained the Syrian people were reacting positively to the new administration; a frank bilateral dialogue based on U.S. and Syrian interests could help to construct a mechanism for promoting cooperation. Asad argued the region needed U.S. involvement to reverse the damaging legacy of the previous administration. Peace with Israel was the only way for Syria to achieve prosperity for its people, but Gaza had inflamed the region and would pose difficult obstacles to re-starting peace discussions. Syria and Israel, he revealed, had been "a few words away" from moving to direct peace negotiations before Israeli military operations in Gaza had disrupted the talks. FM Muallim responded to CODEL calls for re-opening the American School in Damascus and helping the Embassy build a new embassy compound by arguing the U.S. first needed to ease economic sanctions. The positive atmospherics of this meeting and the subsequent positive local press play suggest guarded Syrian optimism. The lack of any concrete Syrian commitments to improve bilateral ties indicates the Syrians are still taking measure of Washington's intentions. End Summary

12. (SBU) Meeting Participants:

CODEL Members:

The Honorable Adam Smith, D-WA, House Armed Services Committee
The Honorable Susan Davis, D-CA, House Armed Services Committee
The Honorable C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger, D-MD, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence
The Honorable Ted Poe, R-TX, House Foreign Affairs Committee
The Honorable Gabrielle Giffords, D-AZ, House Armed Services Committee
The Honorable Glenn Nye, D-VA, House Armed Services Committee
The Honorable Frank Kratovil, D-MD, House Armed Services Committee

Professional Staff Members:

Mr. John Bohanon
Mr. Alex Kugajevsky
Mr. Bill Natter
Mr. Robert Minehart

U.S. Embassy Damascus:

Charge d'Affaires Maura Connelly
Pol/Econ Chief (Notetaker)

Syria:

President Bashar al-Asad
Minister of Foreign Affairs Walid Muallim
Presidential Media Advisor Buthayna Shabaan

What Does Syria Want from the U.S.?

13. (C) A confident Bashar al-Asad greeted the largest U.S. CODEL since Speaker Pelosi's April 2007 trip to Damascus with

DAMASCUS 00000094 002 OF 006

expressions of hope for better bilateral relations and a call for reinvigorated U.S. engagement in the region. After exchanging greetings with President Asad and introducing CODEL members, Congressman Smith said the election of President Obama had resulted in a new openness to dialogue and created an opportunity to explore new approaches to foreign policy. The CODEL's primary interests and concerns were Iran's nuclear program and the war on terrorism. Which issues were most important to Syria? he asked.

14. (C) Asad responded it was first necessary to begin with an assessment of national interests. The U.S. defined priorities in terms of its role as a global power, whereas Syria defined its interests as a regional player. Syria's relations with the previous administration had not been good, even though both countries shared common interests. Washington tended to focus on the "20 percent that divided us," rather than the 80 percent of issues upon which there were overlapping equities. While it was normal for there to be differences between countries, Syria hoped the new administration would recognize and emphasize the commonalities. Syria remained a developing country, and the SARG was committed to improving education, standards of living, and achieving greater prosperity. The key to achieving these goals was peace with Israel, which continued to occupy Syrian land.

15. (C) The subject of peace required discussion of WMD, Asad continued. The Syrian government agreed that preventing the spread of WMD and curbing terrorism were important objectives. Syria had launched a proposal for a WMD-free

Middle East as a UN Security Council member; the proposal was now in the UNSC's inactive "blue file." Regarding terrorism, Asad commented, the U.S. has been fighting it since September 11, 2001, whereas Syria had been fighting terrorism since the 1950s. The point, said Asad, was that discussing objectives was not enough. Both sides needed to expand the dialogue to include views on approaching these objectives and identifying common ground for cooperation. Syria's wish-list from the U.S. included three items, Asad explained. These were: (1) No additional U.S. wars in the region; (2) finding a solution for Iraq; and (3) active U.S. involvement in promoting comprehensive peace.

Asad on Gaza, Hamas, Hizballah, and Peace Talks with Israel

¶16. (C) Congressman Smith agreed with Asad that Syrian society was largely secular. Yet, while Syria rejected and actively fought al-Qaeda, Syria maintained close relations to Hamas and Hizballah, both of which emphasized a religious-based state and the use of violence. "Your relations with these groups pose a challenge for us," said Congressman Smith.

¶17. (C) Asad replied that treatment of these political issues first required discussion of their social dimension. Hamas and Hizballah were products of their societies, and their reliance on extremist ideologies were functions of Israeli occupation, the political reality Israeli policies had created, and the lack of actions by leaders to oppose Israel. Asad argued, "We don't have Hizballah or Hamas in Syria." Syria could not ignore the political necessity of dealing with these actors because of their influence on the ground. He conceded that Syria's embrace of secularism ran contrary to the ideological banners of Hamas and Hizballah, noting at one point that "Hamas is technically an illegal organization" in Syria because of its close association to the Muslim Brotherhood. But, he continued, "not accepting these groups' ideologies is not the same as not dealing with them."

¶18. (C) Asad said he understood the U.S. had a different view of Hamas and Hizballah, but Syria defined its relations with these groups based on its interests as a regional player. Hizballah was an influential group integrated deeply into Lebanese society and politics. Syria had differences

DAMASCUS 00000094 003 OF 006

with Hizballah, but it could not afford to exclude dealing with it. Likewise, Hamas represented important constituencies in the Palestinian arena and could not be excluded because of ideological differences. Asad distinguished between a regional culture that made it impossible to exclude groups because of disagreement over worldviews and the U.S. "politics of labeling" groups. In fact, these actors were reacting to Israel's continued illegal occupation of Arab land which made resistance necessary. Most Arabs viewed them as organs of resistance rather than terrorism, Asad continued.

¶19. (C) CODEL members argued U.S. concerns about Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah reflected the harm these and other actors were doing to regional stability. Hamas, for example, continued to advocate Israel's destruction and had chosen violence when other forms of resistance were available options. It was advocacy and use of violence that undermined the possibility of regional peace, and this was why the U.S. executive and legislative branches viewed these groups with deep suspicion and scrutiny.

¶10. (C) From Syria's perspective, Asad replied, the goal was a region free of militants. Getting rid of Hamas and Hizballah would not achieve this goal, however, since there would be 10 groups willing to take their place. Israeli

policies of occupation and reliance on violence were the root of the problem and were making the situation worse. Israeli violence in Gaza had strengthened the Palestinian desire for armed resistance, despite Israeli objectives to the contrary. Moreover, Israeli policies were feeding the spread of extremism through the region.

¶11. (C) Prior to Israel's late December/early January Gaza incursion, the mood in Syria about peace with Israel had been positive, reported Asad. With Turkish assistance, Israel and Syria were "a few words away" from achieving an agreement to move to direct negotiations. Hamas had at least implicitly acknowledged Israel's existence through Khaled Mesha'al's in principle acceptance of a Palestinian state within 1967 borders. But Gaza had changed the situation completely, Asad observed. Syria hoped to return to peace talks, but doing so would require time.

¶12. (C) Congressman Smith replied that Mesha'al could help things by making the point more publicly and consistently. Other Hamas leaders were still holding onto the goal of destroying Israel and this was undermining peace in the region. Of course they were, said Asad, but what else should be expected when Israel was conducting military operations in Gaza? CODEL members argued strenuously that Hamas itself bore at least some responsibility for provoking Israel through continuing rocket attacks. Asad countered that Israel's prolonged blockade of Gaza left Palestinians no choice but to fight, prompting CODEL members to assert the importance of Special Envoy Mitchell's efforts to revive the peace process.

Iran

¶13. (C) CODEL members argued Syria could play an important, positive role in helping to convince Iran to change its nuclear policies. Asad resisted this notion, saying Western countries had erred by referring a highly politicized issue to the UN Security Council. Iran had agreed in 2003-2004 to allow IAEA monitoring. But a confrontational U.S. approach relying on unsubstantiated reports of "illegal" activities led Iran to suspend its cooperation. Under current circumstances, Iran would not cave to international pressure to suspend its enrichment activities as a condition to further discussions, since this was a right afforded to it as an NPT signatory. The West needed to understand that Iran was pursuing interests as a regional actor. Those interests included securing and defining its borders with Iraq and Afghanistan and improving ties in the Arab world, Asad offered.

DAMASCUS 00000094 004 OF 006

¶14. (C) At different times throughout the meeting, CODEL members stressed the prevailing international view that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons. There was growing concern that Iran would probably cross the threshold within the next 12 months. That left the international community a short window of opportunity to reverse the situation. Syria, CODEL members stressed, could play a positive role in influencing Iranian thinking and averting the need for deploying military options to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions.

¶15. (C) Asad rejected the assumption that Iran's nuclear program was military in nature. IAEA Director General Mohammed al-Baradei had publicly stated the IAEA lacked sufficient evidence to make this determination. Moreover, continued Asad, Iran would do what it assessed to be in its interests; the use of military power against it would succeed only in strengthening Iran's resolve against Western demands. Syria would have little influence on Iranian thinking in this regard. The best advice from Syria to the West was to remove the Iranian nuclear file from the UN Security Council and treat it as a technical monitoring issue

in the IAEA. Iran might then respond positively to such a gesture, contended Asad.

¶16. (C) CODEL members stressed the urgency of the Iranian nuclear issue, noting their strong support for President Obama's policy, according to which Iran could not be allowed to become a nuclear weapons state. Israeli officials had stated repeatedly they would act to prevent Iran from crossing this threshold. Syria could and should use its good relations with Iran to prevent such a scenario, CODEL members reiterated. Asad again rejected the assumption that Iran's nuclear ambitions were military in nature. "We are against a military program," he said, arguing Syria shared a common objective. Syria preferred a different, non-politicized approach, however. "You must accept Iran's right to develop a civilian nuclear program," the Syrian President stipulated.

Iran would not listen to the West or even to Syria unless this condition were met. Moreover, the West needed to recognize that Iran had legitimate security interests in the region, Asad repeated.

Iraq

¶17. (C) In response to CODEL inquires about Syria's relationship with Iraq, Asad reaffirmed Syria's interest in better relations with its eastern neighbor. Asad referred to his 2007 meeting with Iraqi President Talabani in Damascus and said little had improved concretely, despite continuing Syrian efforts to engage Baghdad. The Syrian regime had criticized Iraq's Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) because the Iraqi government was clearly acting at the behest of the United States. U.S. influence had directed Baghdad away from better relations with Syria and had blocked the implementation of economic cooperation MOUs despite their mutual benefit to both countries. At present, Syria held a negative view of the Iraqi political process because it had excluded important voices. Syria believed U.S. domination had prevented a serious reconciliation effort and that Iraq's confessionally-based political system was likely to collapse due to unmitigated factional rivalries.

¶18. (C) On the subject of Iraqi refugees, Asad contrasted the 1.5 million Iraqi refugees in Syria with the 500,000 Palestinians, noting Iraqis had a state to which they could return. He commented the large influx of Iraqis in a short two-year period had led to a significant increase in Syria's population and was a drain on Syria's economy. Asad complained that Iraq had enjoyed budget surpluses of \$40 billion during each of the previous two years, but Baghdad had not contributed any money to educating Iraqi children in Syria. As a political/social issue, however, the Iraqi refugees posed several challenges that Syria could not afford to ignore. Iraqi refugees were moving toward narcotics trafficking, prostitution, and terrorism. The SARG had focused on opening Syrian schools to Iraqi students in order to prevent the loss of an Iraqi generation, he said. Syrian

DAMASCUS 00000094 005 OF 006

officials feared that the next generation of Iraqi youth would return to their country unprepared for the challenges awaiting them. They would be "a bomb that would explode Iraq" and provide a fertile ground for extremism. This was a problem neither the U.S., nor Syria, nor Iraq could avoid, Asad argued.

Improving U.S.-Syrian Bilateral Relations

¶19. (C) CODEL members said Syria, and not just the U.S., needed to demonstrate a desire for better relations. They argued Syria could take positive steps such as re-opening the American School in Damascus and granting permission for the

U.S. Embassy to build a new compound. Asad responded that he saw the new U.S. administration as a new opportunity. Syria was interested in improving the lives of its people and needed U.S. engagement to achieve peace in the region. The U.S. was not a great power because of its military, he added, but rather because of its moral authority, economic might, and technological sophistication. The U.S. had failed to dominate the region by force alone and now had to confront the consequences of previous failed policies. But Syria wanted the U.S. to lead so long as it did so without relying exclusively or even principally on military force.

¶20. (C) Dialogue remained essential between the U.S. and Syria, Asad asserted. He agreed with CODEL arguments that small steps could improve atmospherics, but asked the group to understand the depth to which relations had sunk with the previous administration. Asad explained he had faced a choice after the October 26 U.S. attack on Abu Kamal that had killed eight innocent Syrian civilians. "I could have closed the American school or sent Syrian troops into Iraq to target American soldiers," he argued. Choosing the former option had signaled Syria's interest in preserving the possibility of better relations with the new administration.

¶21. (C) Congressman Smith replied that both sides could dwell on past grievances, but this would not yield any positive results. Asad concurred, saying Syria wanted and was trying to turn a new page. He had agreed in principle to reopening the American school with former President Jimmy Carter in December; the new Administration should signal its respect for Syria. As a practical matter, Asad added, it would be difficult to open the school at present because students were now studying elsewhere and it would take time for the school to make the necessary preparations to resume operations.

¶22. (C) FM Muallim interjected that Syria's major bilateral issues were with the U.S. Congress. He complained that U.S. economic sanctions, particularly the 2003 Syria Accountability Act (SAA), prevented U.S. companies from selling medical technology to Syrian hospitals and spare parts for commercial aircraft. In light of these restrictions, he asked, "How can you ask us about schools and Embassy buildings?" Congressman Smith argued the U.S. Congress had passed the SAA for specific reasons. "These are past us," replied Muallim, arguing that Syrian troops had left Lebanon for good. The U.S. was now focusing on Syria's potential contributions for regional stability, answered Congressman Smith. The President had hired key officials, such as APNSA Jones, with regional experience and had dispatched Senator Mitchell to the region less than a week into his term. Congress also played a role and would look into existing legislation concerning Syria, Congressman Smith added.

¶22. (C) Ending the conversation where it started, Asad and CODEL Smith discussed Hamas's role in the current regional crisis. Hamas ideology ran contrary to the pursuit of peace, argued CODEL members. In addition, added one CODEL participant, Americans regarded Iranian President Ahmedinejad as negatively as Syrians and Iranians appeared to regard former President Bush. Asad responded that Hamas had expressed a willingness to live within 1967 borders. "Why

DAMASCUS 00000094 006 OF 006

don't you take this positive development and build on it," he argued. Hamas was incapable of amending its position quickly, he added. Regarding the American school, Asad suggested "we can look at the SAA and schools together." For Iran, Asad summarized, Syria's approach had the most credibility because it was based on mutual trust. The importance was to continue the conversation and to reach agreement on the right mechanism to coordinate U.S. and Syrian positions, Asad said. Asad stated he was willing to make positive statements about future U.S.-Syrian relations and hoped there would be similar remarks coming out of

Washington.

Comment

¶23. (C) Asad was cautiously optimistic about, and seemed genuinely open to improved bilateral relations. Local post-CODEL press play was generally upbeat and positive. The SARG's unwillingness to avoid any concrete commitments at this stage suggests Asad is still taking measure of the new U.S. administration, a process that is likely to continue for some time. Asad's reliance on international relations jargon in defense of Syria's relationships with Iran, Hamas, and Hizballah reflected some refinement of his talking points, but the Syrian President's positions indicated no increased understanding of USG priorities and decisionmaking. FM Muallim's efforts to transform Asad's in principle agreement with President Carter to reopen the American School into an issue linked to the easing of U.S. economic sanctions demonstrates Syrian guile at its best and worst. Changing the terms of the deal is a common feature of doing business in the souks of Syria. The President's office is no exception.

¶24. (SBU) CODEL Smith did not have an opportunity to clear on this cable.

CONNELLY